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THE PLACE OF THE MUSEUM IN OUR
MODERN LIFE

By F. H. STERNS, Ph.D.

THE great world war calls upon us, more insistently than anything else has done before, to evaluate anew much of our heritage from the past. Age-old institutions can no longer justify themselves by their antiquity. The time has passed when the mere performance, however satisfactory, of a function formerly valuable can be accepted as a substitute for present-day usefulness. We hold it to be our right to require of every custom, of every art, and of every organization a demonstration of its utility in our time and of its ability to meet our needs.

This does not mean that we have become materialists. Cultural values are just as important as they ever were. The demands of the human soul are not to be sacrificed to the desires of the body. But the soul values must be real, and not fictitious. Art, for example, must have something more to commend it than tradition. "Old masters" can no longer hold their places, unless they possess the merit of some supreme appeal to a universal sense of beauty (a test destined to remove many of them from their pedestals). Science, too, must be something more than scholasticism or a compendium of universal knowledge. Our schools must give us more than pedantry, and our churches more than ceremony. Although we do not intend to use a materialistic yard-stick for spiritual things, nevertheless we insist upon measuring them rigidly.

Among the institutions which "bake no bread," but minister only to the spirit, are museums, and these we now propose to examine. They have a respectable antiquity, but do they possess that which warrants the continuation of the expenditure of vast sums of money upon them? Have they functions to perform of sufficient importance to justify their enormous costs? If they have a purpose which the modern world can accept, do they fulfil it in a degree corresponding to the energies devoted to them? Are their dividends in life-values a reasonable return from our investment? Do they show a surplus or a deficit, when their complete accounts are balanced? Do they pay?

At the foundation of all museums are collections, and men

have been collectors almost since time began. The archeologist finds in the earliest village sites "caches" of multi-colored pebbles or curious fossils, while the same sort of objects occur in almost every "cabinet" in the United States to-day. Modern savages gather scalps or human heads, while the trophy instinct still exists among the hunters who make their annual pilgrimage to Maine. To-day our children collect buttons or marbles, our wives trading stamps or souvenir post cards, while we interest ourselves in coins or samples of ore.

The impelling force of curiosity has led many a man to gather and preserve unusual or mysterious objects. Specimens from foreign lands or from the depths of the sea have always had a wide appeal. Crystals, petrified objects, rocks supposed to contain precious metal, or stones weathered to a fancied resemblance to some living being or human artifact are frequent in collections. Skulls and Indian arrow heads are always saved. Things associated with the dead or with noted criminals possess a strong interest. Monstrosities and freaks seem irresistible.

Curiosity as a motive is supplemented by the sense of superiority gained from exclusive possession. The rarer the object is, the more it is to be desired. So the stamp collector seeks inverted centers and double surcharges regardless of any real significance these peculiarities may have. The art collector desires a genuine Rembrandt though it may be such an inferior product of the master's hand that it possesses little merit. The antiquarian boasts that he owns the largest accumulation of "problematical" forms in his vicinity, as if ignorance were a matter in which one could take pride.

The formation of still other collections has been promoted by intellectual interest. The scientist often preserves the objects he has gathered for study. He needs also to make "type" series for comparative purposes. So the student of art requires representative examples of each school or period of painting or sculpture. The teacher likewise must have illustrative specimens. Thus we find back of collecting the desire for knowledge, the lure of glory, or the sense of wonder.

Motives so different have necessarily led to very dissimilar results. Objects accumulated because of curiosity or the wish for exclusive possession are of one sort, while those gathered because of intellectual interest are of another sort. The one consists of the unique, the unusual, or the spectacular, while the other is made up from the normal, the typical, or the historically or scientifically valuable. The one is measured by the num-

ber or the rarity of its specimens, while the other is judged by their representativeness.

The motives which have inspired collection-making are the ones also which have given rise to museums. Popular curiosity, for example, supported the original Barnum and old Boston Museums, with their two-headed calves and three-legged chickens; and the same motive to-day keeps the dime museum alive. Our oldest American museum once had to depend for its existence on an appeal to this sense of wonder as the following advertisement will show.¹

THE MUSEUM OF SOUTH CAROLINA

In Chalmers' street, (near the City Square)

CONSISTING of an extensive collection of
*Beasts, Birds, Reptiles, Fishes, Warlike
Arms Dresses*, and other CURIOSITIES—among
which are:

The HEAD of a New Zealand Chief
An Egyptian Mummy (a child)
The Great White Bear of Greenland
The Black and the Red Wolves of South Carolina
The South American Lion
The Duck Bill'd Platypus from New Holland
The Bones of an Ostrich as large as those of a
Horse
The Boa Constrictor or Anaconda Snake, 25 feet
long
The Grampus Whale, 20 feet long
800 Birds, 70 Beasts, 200 Fishes
4000 Specimens of Minerals.
Shoes of the Chinese Ladies, 4 inches long
The Saw Fish—Saw 4½ feet in length
A large collection of views of the Public Build-
ings, in Europe—and
A Fine Electrical Machine

The whole elegantly arranged in glass cases,
open every day from 9 o'clock, and brilliantly
illuminated every evening, with occasionally a
Band of Music.

Admittance 25 cents. Season ticket \$1.;
Children half price. f Jan. 6

It would be hard to exaggerate the part played in the founding of museums by the sense of superiority derived from ex-

¹ This appeared in January, 1826, in the *Charleston City Gazette*. I copy it from the *Proceedings of the American Association of Museums*, Vol. 9, 1915, p. 59.

clusive possession. Collections made under the lure of such a motive attain their end in the fullest measure only when they are shown to some one. So what is more natural than that their owner should have them forever exhibited in a museum to a wondering public, with the name of the donor in a prominent place? Or that a museum should be started expressly to house such a collection? Or that this museum should bear the name of its rich patron? Need we mention the number of collections and museums called after wealthy men, or the number of tablets to the memory of those who financed some expedition, to show the importance of this motive in the history of museums?

In recent years, intellectual interest has become a prominent factor in the founding and continuation of museums. To demonstrate the truth of this statement, it is necessary only to cite the development of museums supported by universities and colleges, depending upon grants from city, state, or nation, founded and maintained by learned societies, or existing solely as educational institutions for children. These bodies propose to preserve articles of artistic, historic, or scientific worth, to advance research, or to diffuse knowledge as widely as possible.

Thus curiosity, the sense of superiority derived from exclusive possession, and intellectual interest are the foundations of museums as well as of collections. In the past, they supplied the motives for the building and supporting of such institutions. Is this true to-day? Do these organizations believe their functions to be the satisfaction of the sense of wonder, the desire for glory, or the passion for knowledge? Does the public which eventually pays the bills subscribe to these aims? What is the attitude, in regard to the old-time purposes, of the museums and their patrons?

If general tendencies may be regarded as evidence, the museums have repudiated the satisfaction of curiosity as their end. Undoubtedly it is still a motive for the visitor, and so appeal must still be made to it; but no well-organized modern institution will cater to it. They no longer find a place for freaks and monstrosities. One will search in vain for three-legged chickens or two-headed calves. Fakes, such as Barnum's mermaid which once excited so much attention, are rigidly barred. Museum curators devote much energy to the elimination of everything of doubtful authenticity, no matter how interesting it may be. Some places still cling to the old ways, but those of the better class tell us by their actions that they no longer consider it to be their function to satisfy idle curiosity.

Our museums must do something more for us than the movies or the circus. We will not be satisfied with petrified menageries. Nor do we care to support side-shows of freaks. The unusual and the meaningless can no longer occupy much of a place in our lives. To amuse is not now the function of a museum.

The sense of superiority derived from exclusive possession has likewise been discarded as an aim. The respectable museum no longer boasts of the uniqueness of its specimens. Things whose worth depends largely on their unusualness are not wanted at all. Objects of great rarity, but of real value, are freely shared with less fortunate institutions, either by the making of copies or by actual loan exhibits. No museum now would reserve for its own members the use and enjoyment of its collections. Self-glorification is no longer an approved motive.

Nor is the exaltation of the rich patron deemed any more commendable. Museums and collections are still called after founders or donors in many cases; but because of the increase of fine institutions and splendid accumulations of specimens which bear the name of no individual, this practice gives but little honor. Men are still impelled by the wish for fame to contribute to museums, but to-day their rewards are small. The promotion of the sense of superiority derived from exclusive possession, either of the museum or of its patron, has ceased to be a legitimate function.

The satisfaction of intellectual interest, on the other hand, as the aim of a museum has now received the sanction both of these institutions themselves and of the public which supports them. More and more are government agencies in city, state, and nation contributing to aquariums, zoological gardens, art galleries, and natural history museums, because they regard them to be essentially a part of the public school system. Universities and learned societies maintain many such institutions for research. There is an increased desire to interest the public, and to make the collections as useful as possible to investigators, to craftsmen, to the schools, and to the casual visitor. The ideal now is have every one who enters the museum building go out with a broader outlook on life, a deeper conception of the universe in which he dwells, or a keener appreciation of the true and the beautiful.

The accepted function now of a museum is to satisfy the thirst for knowledge or the love of beauty, especially by the use of specimens, models, or other objects appealing directly to the

senses. But for whom is it to do this? For the student of the future? Or for the investigator to-day? Or shall it be done for the general public? If for the first, we will store and care for the perishable materials of to-day that they may be ready for his use to-morrow. For the second, we should need to supply workrooms and equipment for research. For the third, there would be required proper installation and labeling of collections for exhibition purposes. Is the museum to be a warehouse, a laboratory, or a school, or all three? Is its function to preserve, to develop, or to disseminate the true and the beautiful.

We all recognize the necessity for the careful preservation of those objects which are desirable as records. Time is a great destroyer. Moths and rust corrupt, and thieves are apt to steal. Deterioration, such as is always taking place, progresses much faster when specimens are neglected. It is so easy to misplace things that it seldom happens that they can be found when they are wanted unless they have been cared for. Even if such an object is found, its parts may be so displaced that they can not be restored to their original arrangement, or its record may be lost, so that its exact value or even its authenticity may be open to question. Some person or some institution must make it a business to preserve anything of artistic, historic, or scientific value.

Certain commercial bodies exist for this very purpose. They possess the facilities necessary to do it. They have, for example, fire-proof vaults, in which the temperature and moisture may be properly regulated. They have locks and watchmen to guard against thieves. They are equipped to treat objects with preservatives and disinfectants, to minimize the destructive action of time and the elements, and of insect pests. They serve the public well.

Museums, on the other hand, often fail to perform this function as satisfactorily. The possibility of fire or theft is increased by the presence of visitors. Constant exhibition of an object allows injury due to sunlight. Handling by investigators and students exposes the specimen to misplacement, disarrangement of parts, or the loss of the accompanying data.

A museum can not remedy these faults without becoming a mere warehouse. Its whole nature is changed if it has no exhibits, no visitors, and no students. Professor T. H. Montgomery once described such a condition thus, "A museum that consists mainly of collections and of simple caretakers of the same has a speaking resemblance to a graveyard."

There can be no question but that a museum must store some

specimens. It can not exhibit everything it has at once. If it is to be a place for students and investigators, it can not be without large accumulations of "type" objects. But this necessary preservation for use is a very different matter from that sort of storage which would make the institution a "cemetery of bric-à-brac." A museum must store and care for perishable specimens, but this must not be its chief function. A museum is not primarily a warehouse.

This conclusion was once stated very aptly by Mr. F. A. Lucas as follows:

A collection of specimens does not make a museum any more than a collection of paints and brushes makes an artist. It is not what we have, but what we do with what we have that produces results, and the true value of the museum does not lie in its specimens alone, but what it does or what is done with them.

Another writer tells us that "the museum should be more than a mere collection of specimens. It should be a house of ideas." This suggests very strongly that a museum's chief function is research. For how else do worth-while ideas arise? Is there any other way than by careful observation that we can obtain true conceptions of nature? Knowledge is advanced only by systematic investigations. So if a museum is to be more than a mere collection, if it is to be a house of ideas, some sort of research is imperative.

If a museum were a mere "old curiosity shop," if its place depended entirely on what its accumulation of objects was worth, or if it were merely a warehouse of valuables, still research would be important to it, because thus the value of its specimens would be enhanced. For even the curious demand a name and an explanation of what they see. If you can classify the object, and list its striking peculiarities, then it becomes still more a matter of interest. Even Barnum's famous establishment would not have survived if it had not labeled its curiosities with titles and descriptions.

When the specimens are documents of science or of history, their value depends upon what some one can read in them. Now if no one takes the trouble to read them, if no one by classification attempts to assign them to their proper position, if no one tries to relate them to others of their kind or to differentiate them from these, if no one cares to investigate their place or their authenticity, if no one believes that their evidence is worth the getting, then it will be difficult to persuade any one that they have worth-while evidence to give.

So it is with a work of art. If its beauty is such that no

one takes the trouble to see it, if no one cares which artist made it, if no one is concerned as to its age or genuineness, if its lessons in the history of art or in technique are of no value to any one, then no one will regard the specimen to be of worth.

Now all these things require some measure of research. Whether it be naming, description, classification, or explanation which is attempted, still some one must make some sort of investigation to accomplish it. Thus we find research important, even when the aim is merely the possession of valuable specimens.

The same is true when the object of a museum is education. Before any one can teach, he must first learn. If the institution is to disseminate knowledge, it must first acquire it; and this can be done only by careful investigation. The student requires labels giving names, description, classification and explanation; but the preparation of sound labels demands research. The more the museum has discovered, the more it can tell others; the sounder its own knowledge is, the more valuable will be its contribution to public education.

Further, the institution engaged in research can command the services of the most eminent and able men. It can thus have on its staff to arrange its exhibits, to label its specimens, and to educate its visitors, men whom it could not otherwise engage. To advance teaching, the best teacher possible must be obtained, and only by encouraging careful investigations can this be done. Thus research is a necessary function of a museum regardless of what its other aims may be.

Sometimes there has been a tendency to exaggerate the legitimate demand for research in a museum until it becomes the whole object of the institution. Often appeal is made exclusively to the learned and the specialist. Even to-day there are curators who cater entirely to a limited class of visitors. This attitude was voiced not so many years ago in the Association of American Museums thus:

I consider the chief aim of a museum the advancement of science. This is its function; it must not go to the public; it must lead.

Now there is a certain danger here—even for the advancement of science. Research, the results of which are not applied or made available to the general public, but which are written up only for technical journals, has a narrowing influence. When one's audience consists exclusively of specialists, where one's entire effort is confined to one limited field, one is apt to lose a broad view-point; and then even the research work becomes sterile.

Besides, research is better carried out in other places. The great fields of nature are the places to study nature's ways. Museums at their best contain but a human selection of the things of the universe, and any conclusion based on their specimens is liable to errors due to the personal bias of the selector. Collections should represent the organized results of systematic investigations rather than their sole basis. Museums should be more of a record of researches successfully completed and now made available for all, than of places to carry on such work.

There is an increasing demand both on the parts of the museums and of the general public that the results of museum work should be made available for all, as the following quotation from Mr. Cheshire Lowton Boone will show.

Now the mere collection and systematic study of things of nature and the doings of people is an occupation leading nowhere, profiting no one, and obviously ending in a cultural cul-de-sac, unless the student uses his research to illuminate some race problem. . . . I grant you the delight in personal vocations, because I have this in common with other men. But the most enthusiastic interest in science or art or literature as a justification for the maintenance of museums must, it seems to me, imply the advancement of culture, of social richness, and adjustment. In other words, those vast stores of reference material called museums must not only be indexed, classified, and studied, but exploited, and their significance laid bare for the benefit of the generations now and later. To this end the museum of whatever kind must, it appears, get into sympathy with the people, who are the ones to finally digest the results of expert study and perhaps lift themselves a peg intellectually.

This idea was brought out at one time even more strongly by W J McGee.

The issue is between scientific research on one hand and education on the other. I think the prime function of a modern museum is education. The way in which science is best advanced is through research in the fields of nature and not in the museum. In order, however, that we may have naturalists forever with use and have an appreciation of the outside world we must educate the growing minds. The functions of a great public museum are education, the implanting in the minds of children and laymen of interpretative nuclei, interpretations of nature as it is represented, perhaps pictorially, but calculated to create an appreciation of nature in such a manner that the mind is stimulated and set to work.

That education is an important function of a museum, if not the main function, needs no further argument. The museums are rapidly coming to this position, and certainly the general public approves of it.

However, there still remains the question of the type of education to be given. Most of these institutions seem to be to-day in the position the universities were fifty years ago. They be-

lieve their function to be educational, but the public must have no say in what it will be taught. The museums have a "required course of study," and this is cultural rather than practical. A few great museums are now trying the "elective system," they have added technical and occupational "classes," and they are even going in for "university" extension. In this democratization of the museums, the needs and desires of the people are being taken more into account, and room is being found even for the craftsman. A museum's chief function is educational, in the widest sense of that term.

The purposes of a museum are: first, to disseminate knowledge, second to advance it by research, and third to do such other things as are necessary to the forwarding of its two chief aims (for example, the storing and preserving of objects of scientific, historic, or artistic value).

We are now ready to subscribe to the motto of the American Museum of Natural History, as expressed in its charter of 1869, "for the purpose of . . . encouraging and developing the study of Natural Science; of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and to that end of furnishing popular instruction," or, as it is printed on the museum's publications, "a free institution, for the people, for education, for science."